Eliot, Cameron and Woolf: The Literary Interpretation of the Photographic Gaze and its Effects on the Female Body

Student Presenter: Mary Austin Pura
Project Advisor: Prof. Amy Martin

It is easy to fall into the trap of thinking that images and literature require two different functions of sight, to read and to look. But what if looking is an essential part of reading literature, particularly in relation to characters engaging in the act of looking at other characters? Is it not also true that by looking at a painting or a photograph we, in that moment, possess it? Caroline Levine furthers this point: “The world is not simply given to sight: it is shaped through the interested eyes of the tourist, the artist, the colonizer, the ordinary man…” In other words, the gaze has significant influence to the point where the subject is altered, much like the ways in which the male gaze effects or “colonizes” the female body.

My thesis examines the relationship between the works of George Eliot and Virginia Woolf in conversation with visual culture, specifically with the photographs of Julia Margaret Cameron. With the rise of portrait photography and commodity culture, greatly due to the Great Exhibition of 1851, Eliot responds by looking to a pre-industrial past. Having a great disdain for her own photograph, and aware of the public’s negative reactions, she explores the consequences of the male gaze in Middlemarch (1872) and Adam Bede (1859). The gaze in turn serves as a pre-industrial camera. The way in which Eliot’s female characters respond to the gaze determines their moral trajectory within the plot. Having inherited a Victorian literary lineage, Virginia Woolf through a modernist perspective, is at the same time influenced by Eliot, specifically in Orlando: A Biography (1928). But Woolf tackles the question of photography head-on, inserting various photographs and paintings into the novel. This encourages the reader to take part in the gaze, examining the ambiguous gender of the subject presented in the text.

Photography can often be compared to mirrors. It allows us to see things as they truly are, as a reflection of reality in the moment. The act of painting is often considered the act of creating the illusion of reality. Photographs can also alter reality, improving or distorting an image. There is no rule that the sitter being photographed cannot modify the contents of what they are wearing or how they act. The photograph may capture reality as it is in the moment, but it does not necessarily tell us the truth. Woolf bends truth allowing her photographs to accommodate a fictional biography. The characters within Eliot’s novels experience what I call the “photographic gaze.” This gaze, like a photograph, captures the image of the body of the female as it is in that exact moment. But while the physical body may reflect reality, it does not necessarily reveal the whole truth. The male characters see what they choose to see in their own distorted vision of reality.

---

1 Levine, Caroline. "Women or Boys? Gender, Realism, and the Gaze in Adam Bede." Women's Writing 3.2 (1996): p. 113